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ABSTRACT

Recently, the definition of functional literacy has been broadened to include the completion of a secondary education or its equivalent. This definition focuses on obtaining the functional competencies required to perform adequately in adult life. Three major sets of functional competencies are represented in models developed by the Adult Performance Level Project, the New York State External High School Diploma Program, and the state of California. Difficulties with traditional adult education programs have been accessibility and a lack of defined competencies. Competency-based adult education (CBAE) responds to this problem by providing an individualized set of competencies to meet adult needs. CBAE programs share these common components: (1) identified and stated outcomes or competencies; (2) a formal assessment system; (3) functional literacy subject matter integrating both basic and life skills; and (4) certification of mastery of competencies. Research on CBAE indicates that: students, administrators, and staff have different perceptions of the importance of competency areas; no competency list is appropriate for all students; more effective ways of measuring competencies need to be developed; and competency-based programs are effective. This fact sheet includes a bibliography of seven resources, most of which are available from the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) system. (DC)

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Competency Education for Adult Literacy.

OVERVIEW: ERIC Fact Sheet No. 10

by

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ERIC OVERVIEW

FACT SHEET No. 10

Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

COMPETENCY EDUCATION FOR ADULT LITERACY

WHAT IS FUNCTIONAL LITERACY?

In 1900 the high school graduation rate was 12 percent. By 1974 it had increased to 78 percent. Granted, more people are graduating from high school; but what basic skills do they have upon graduation? The question of competency, or literacy, is often another matter. Historically, literacy has been defined as the ability to read and write a simple message or to function at the fifth grade level. More recently, the definition of literacy has been broadened to include the completion of a secondary education or its equivalent. This definition focuses on obtaining the functional competencies required to perform adequately in adult life.

WHAT ARE FUNCTIONAL COMPETENCIES?

Functional competencies are the knowledge and skills that are needed to meet the daily requirements of adult life in our society. There are currently three major sets of functional competencies that are used in basic adult education programs. These sets are represented in the following models:

- The Adult Performance Level Project developed functional competencies oriented toward life-coping skills in today's society. These competencies integrate skills and knowledge. They are organized along a two-dimensional concept which suggests a set of skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, computation, problem-solving, and interpersonal relations) that are applied to five knowledge areas (consumer economics, occupational knowledge, health, community resources, and government and law).

- The New York State External High School Diploma Program provides a nontraditional process for earning a high school diploma. The program has identified sixty-four basic skills and general competencies in communication, computation, social awareness, consumer awareness, scientific awareness, and occupational preparedness, as well as specialized competencies in individualized occupational or vocational skills, advanced academic skills, and specified skills in areas such as art, music, and community organization. The general competencies are combined with specific competencies to comprise a total diploma program.

- California conducted a statewide analysis to identify necessary competencies for functional economic and educational success in today's society. Five main categories include cultural, economic, health and safety, interpersonal, and social-political areas. These five categories are further divided into subcategories. Local programs select tailored lists of competencies for their programs in consultation with adult education students, staff, administrators, and community members. The state requires that all local programs validate the student's ability to read, write, and compute at a level needed to function in society.

WHAT ARE SOME DIFFICULTIES WITH TRADITIONAL ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAMS?

Until the seventies, undereducated adults had only three major alternatives for gaining a secondary education, which included the traditional evening school programs, the correspondence course study, and the high school equivalency instruction/testing program. These programs present problems for adults, such as difficulty attending classes because of time scheduling or distance, and inappropriateness because the educational content or structure is not accepted by employers or is not specific to individual adult needs. The problem, then, has been in essence two-fold: both accessibility and a lack of specifically defined and validated competencies.

HOW CAN COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION RESPOND TO THE NEEDS OF ADULTS?

Competency-based adult education (CBAE) is defined as "a performance-based process leading to demonstrated mastery of basic and life skills necessary for the individual to function proficiently in society" (U.S. Office of Education 1978). CBAE responds to the needs of adults by providing the opportunity to develop an individualized set of competencies to meet adult needs, by using a variety of instructional strategies that appeal to adults who may not have performed well in traditional educational settings, other than that of the formal school, and by providing assessment procedures to verify competencies that have been mastered by adult learners.

WHAT STRATEGIES ARE USED IN COMPETENCY-BASED ADULT EDUCATION?

Competency-based adult education programs share these common components:

- *A list of identified and stated outcomes or competencies* Such lists have been developed through research and/or validated through local, regional, or national efforts, and the competencies provide clearly stated instructional goals.

- *A formal assessment system* CBAE evaluation provides for pre- and post assessment of adult student performance on the selected competencies. Preassessment information gives diagnostic information for the instructional staff to use in planning individualized learning activities. Postassessment results validate the students' performance level upon exit from the program and provide a basis for certifying competence.

- *Functional literacy subject matter integrating both basic and life skills* Basic skills include reading, computation, writing, problem solving, and listening/viewing/speaking. Life skills focus on life roles such as employee, consumer, citizen, family member, healthy individual, and personal problem-solver.

- *Certification of mastery of competencies* Some programs are linked to external or nontraditional high school diploma programs that certify an adult for a high school diploma. Others are linked to the mastery of competencies required for entry into other programs such as vocational training, conventional high school diploma, or GED instructional preparation.

WHAT DOES RESEARCH SAY ABOUT COMPETENCY-BASED ADULT EDUCATION?

Research has been completed in three areas relating to competency-based adult education.

- A major area of research has been the adequacy of existing competency lists. This research indicates that different groups, such as students, administrators, and staff, have differing perceptions of the importance of competency areas. Also, research suggests that no one universal listing of functional competencies is appropriate for all students and that competencies should be evaluated in light of the learner's sex, ethnic group, educational level, and geographic location.

- A second research focus has been on the adequacy of existing assessment techniques that are used to measure performance related to competencies. Researchers stress the importance of including applied performance tests in addition to paper-pencil tests. In general, research indicates there is a need to develop alternative, more effective ways of measuring functional competencies.

- Finally, research has examined the impact of competency-based instruction. Research to date has found that students show gains on functional competency measures as a result of participating in competency-based programs, that students report feeling "more capable and confident in handling various life situations," and that these programs have higher rates of retention than traditional programs.

This Overview is based on the following two publications:

Kay worm, C. *Competency-Based Adult Education: A Challenge for the 80s.* Information Series No. 208, $3.80. Columbus, OH: The ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, The Ohio State University, 1980. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 193 528).

United States Office of Education. *Report of the USOE Invitational Workshop on Adult Competency Education.* Washington, DC: United States Office of Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1978. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 162 147).

Other Resources

Adult Student Assessment Resource Guide. Adult Competency Based Diploma Project. Los Angeles Unified School District, 1979. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 179 582).

Boulmetis, J. *Competency-Based Adult Vocational Instruction: What Is It?* Belmont, CA: Fearon-Pitman, 1980.

Nickse, R., and McClure, L., eds. *Competency-Based Education: Beyond Minimum Competency Testing.* New York: Teacher's College Press, 1979.

Parker, J., and Taylor, P., eds. *The CB Reader: A Guide to Understanding Competency-Based Adult Education.* Montclair, NJ: Adult Continuing Education Center, Montclair State College, 1980. (Available from Adult Education Clearinghouse, National Center for Adult Continuing Education, Montclair State College, Upper Montclair, NJ 07043). (ERIC Clearinghouse Accession No. CE 028 576).

Russell, E., and others, eds. *National Directory of Selected Competency-Based Adult Vocational Education Programs.* Information Series No. 127, $12.25. Columbus, OH: The National Center for Research in Vocational Education, The Ohio State University, 1978. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 153 049).

Additional and related information on this subject may be found by using the index terms applied to the above-listed ERIC documents. See appropriate RIE volumes.

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